

NORRIS HILL WIND POWER PROJECTS MOVE FORWARD

By Nick Gevock

VIRGINIA CITY — The effort to turn the Norris Hill area of Madison County into a wind energy hotspot took a major step forward Tuesday as county commissioners unanimously approved two projects slated for construction there.

Commissioners gave the green light for Madison Valley Renewable Energy, LLC to put up eight additional test towers on Norris Hill. The company already has eight towers with anemometers to check wind speeds. It needed the additional towers because it has leased more ground to eventually put up enough wind power generators to produce 150 megawatts of electricity.

Les Brown, a company representative, said so far the initial tests show that Norris Hill has excellent potential.

“The wind on Norris Hill is what everyone has always thought it was,” he said during a public meeting. “It’s very strong.” Norris Hill has drawn a lot of attention from wind power companies not only because it’s windy, but also because it has the needed main power line to hook into. Brown said eventually his company’s facility there could be as large as the wind power plant at Judith Gap, one of the largest in the state.

His company has leased more than 14,000 acres of land from ranchers and the state of Montana to build a facility, yet is still collecting the wind data that private investors require before moving forward.

Commissioners also approved a permit for Sagebrush Energy, a Wyoming company, to build eight wind power generators in the Norris Hill area. The company has been collecting wind data for nearly a year and agrees that Norris Hill has great potential to produce wind power, said Paul Kimball, president.

He said Sagebrush won’t build the towers for some time, however, because investors want assurance an area is well suited for wind energy.

“We are not going to proceed until we have 18 months of really first-class data,” he said.

Not everyone, however, is enthused about the projects. A handful of people showed up to oppose the projects, saying they would create an eyesore on the landscape and could kill a lot of birds.

The Judith Gap project is a prime example of how studies conducted before a tower goes up can be unreliable, said Sherrill Gold. She said recent news accounts that the

project had likely killed 1,000 bats demonstrate that wind power mills can hurt wildlife.

“They were totally taken by surprise that this was a major migration corridor for bats,” she said. “I’m just skeptical about all these studies.” And Jim Parsons questioned how much the projects would help the local economy. He said the towers could hurt wildlife, be visible from a long way away and ultimately be damaging to the Madison Valley’s tourist economy, while only benefiting out-of-state investors.

“These wind turbines are mostly for these people’s tax shelters,” he said. “These folks are not here to help us; they’re here to make money.” But commissioners praised the projects as a way to help area ranchers stay on the land, create jobs and help produce clean, homegrown energy. Commissioner Dave Schulz said in asking around he’s found broad support for the projects.